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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Bangladesh: Elections in a New Country

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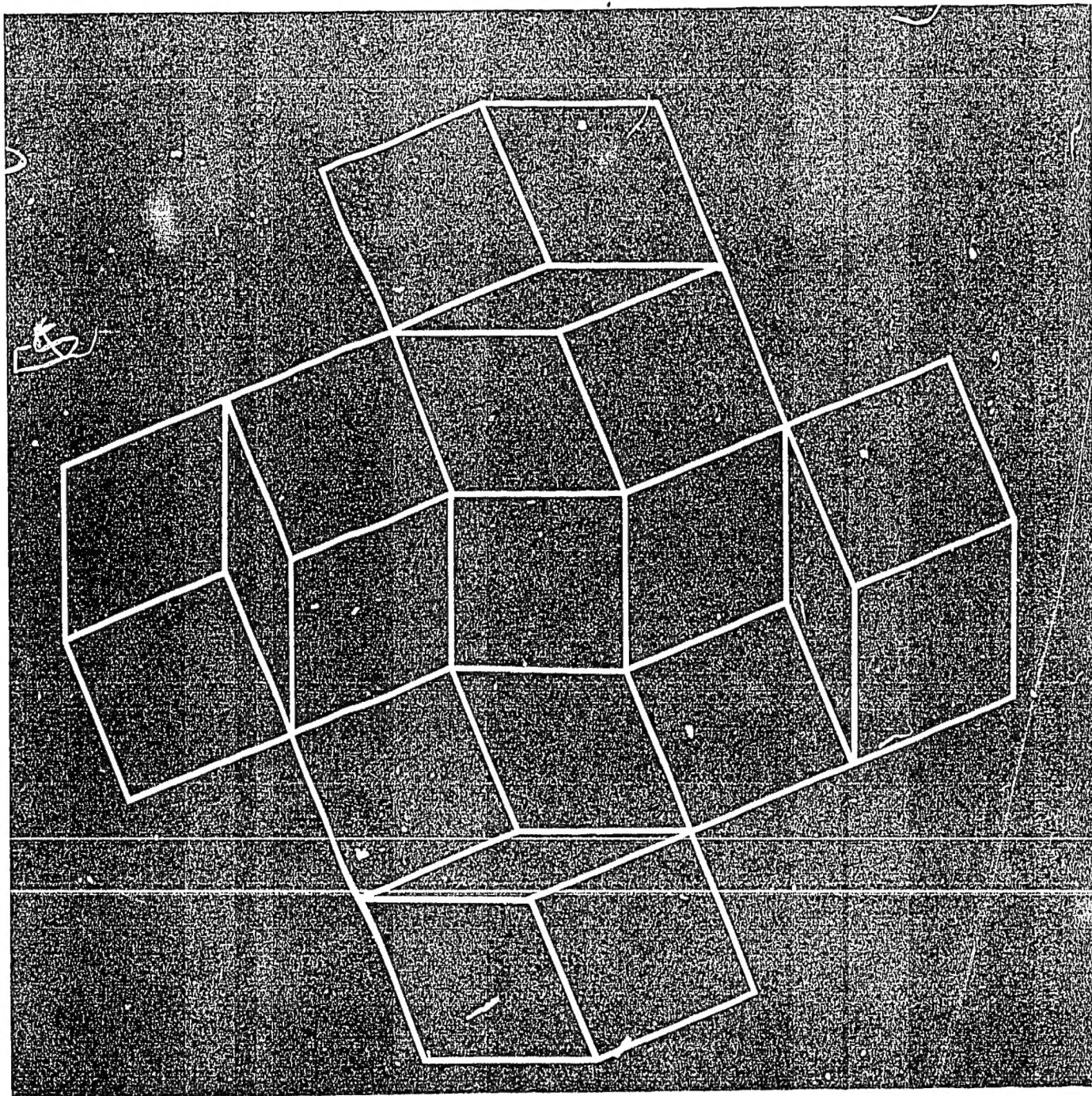
Nº 671

2 March 1973
No. 0359/73A

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BANGLADESH

elections in a new country

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The ruling Awami League will very likely win the national parliamentary elections on 7 March by a sizable majority. Economic problems and governmental shortcomings appear to have tarnished the ruling party's image during the past year, but its leader, Prime Minister Mujib, remains widely revered. No other Bangladesh politician enjoys comparable popularity. The main opposition parties, all leftist-oriented, have not worked together and are incapable of matching either the Awami League's organization or its resources. With an Awami League victory, no major shifts in government policy appear likely after the elections.

Background

Bangladesh, the world's eighth most populous nation and second largest Muslim country, goes to the polls on 7 March 1973 for its first national elections as an independent state. Some 1,080 candidates are running for 300 parliamentary seats; later a vote is to be taken among the elected legislators in order to fill 15 additional seats set aside for women. The parliament's term of office is five years.

The last elections there took place in December 1970, when present-day Bangladesh was still a province of Pakistan. The elections at that time were intended as a step toward a transfer of power from a military to a civilian government for all of Pakistan. The East Pakistanis voted for both a national and a provincial assembly. The Awami League ran on a platform calling for a large measure of autonomy for the eastern wing. Public opinion was strongly in favor of autonomy; many East Pakistanis regarded West Pakistani rule over the eastern wing as exploitation, and their resentment had been sharpened a month earlier when a cyclone ravaged the southern coast, killing several hundred thousand people. Many East Pakistanis felt that the government, dominated as it was by West Pakistanis, had failed to respond to the catastrophe with a sufficient sense of urgency.

The Awami League entered the 1970 election campaign with many advantages. It, alone of East Pakistani parties, was autonomy-minded as

well as large and well-organized. Additionally, the party had an active student wing campaigning in the countryside. Perhaps most important, the Awami League was led by Sheikh Mujib, a well-known and popular politician with solid credentials as a Bengali nationalist. Mujib had long been calling for provincial autonomy and had frequently been jailed by Pakistan's military rulers.

The Awami League swept the elections, winning 167 of East Pakistan's 169 seats in the



**Prime Minister
Mujibur Rahman**

national assembly and 288 of the 300 seats in the provincial assembly. In the national assembly election the Awami League received 72.6 percent of the popular vote. The landslide gave the league—which had virtually no support in West Pakistan—an absolute majority of seats in the national assembly, confronting the Pakistani Government with a real problem. The months following the

elections saw a hardening of attitudes of both Awami League and West Pakistani leaders concerning who was to assume power in Pakistan and what was to be the relationship between the eastern and western wings. In March 1971 the Pakistan Army cracked down in the east, touching off nine months of civil strife and international war and culminating in the establishment of independent Bangladesh in December 1971.

Independence and New Elections

Mujib returned triumphantly to Bangladesh in January. His leadership in the weeks preceding the Pakistani crackdown, followed by his arrest and incarceration in West Pakistan for over nine months amid widespread fears that he would be executed, had elevated him from his position as the country's most popular politician to a higher status as a father figure. Meanwhile, right-wing parties that had opposed the Awami League in 1970 had been outlawed on charges of

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collaboration with Pakistan. Their leaders were dead, exiled, in jail, or lying low. The Awami League's only remaining competitors were weak leftist parties: the tiny Communist Party of Bangladesh, which had been illegal and underground until independence; and the two wings of the national Awami Party, one of them with little support among the rural masses and the other lacking in organization and discredited by its former association with Islamabad's Chinese allies. A new legislative body was set up composed of those who had been elected from East Pakistan in 1970 to the national and provincial assemblies and had survived the turmoil of 1971. Virtually all of the members were Awami Leaguers.

Mujib's popularity and the weakness of the opposition would probably have permitted him to continue ruling for several years without holding elections. However, his apparent determination to establish his—and the country's—democratic credentials led to the promulgation in December 1972 of a new constitution that provided for a parliamentary system of government. Parliamentary elections were scheduled for March 1973. Mujib's decision in favor of early elections may have been motivated in part by a realization that the country's all-but-intractable economic and social problems were likely over time to erode the ruling party's strength and bolster the opposition. There had already been signs that the Awami League's popularity was starting to slip.

The Ruling Party

That the Awami League's prestige would suffer some damage during 1972 was all but inevitable. The newly independent nation faced staggering problems. The area had long been desperately poor and periodically ravaged by natural calamities and epidemics. A population density of nearly 1,400 per square mile made Bangladesh one of the world's most crowded countries. The civil and international wars of 1971 had devastated the economy; transportation and distribution systems had been particularly hard hit. Many basic commodities were scarce and unemployment was widespread. Much of the country's agricultural equipment and support structure had been destroyed. There was a shortage of the skills

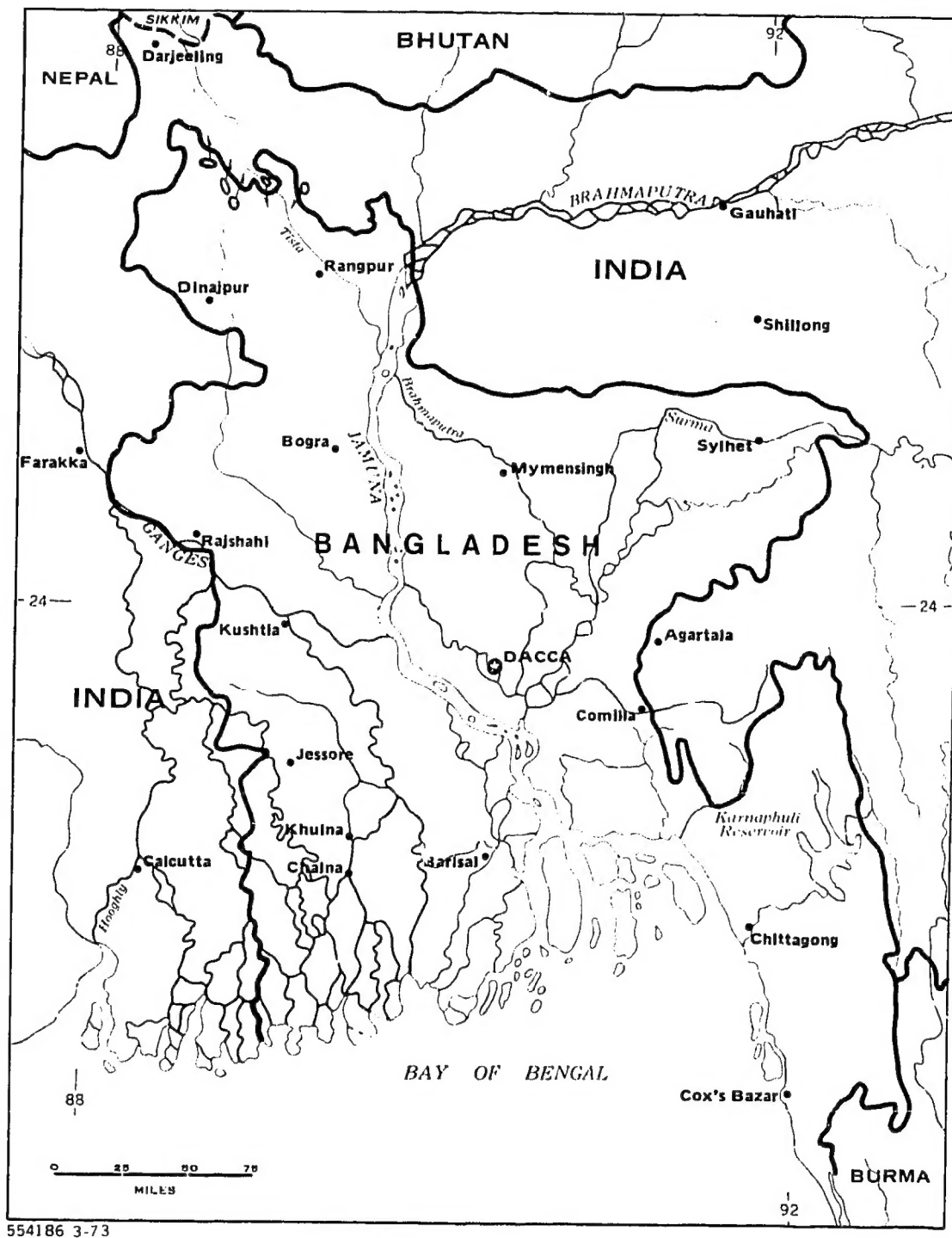
needed for running the civil administration and the modest industrial sector; many experienced personnel were dead or had been discredited and in some cases jailed for allegedly having collaborated with Islamabad. Finally, with independence already attained, the autonomy issue was no longer available as a rallying cry.

As 1972 wore on, the euphoria surrounding the achievement of independence began to dissipate. Commodity shortages persisted and prices rose substantially. Awami Leaguers were widely accused of profiteering and corruption. Millions of Bengalis, including some who had been active in the independence struggle, remained jobless. New, leftist-oriented groups opposed to the Awami League sprang up in the tiny urban labor movement and—more importantly—among university students, who are usually in the vanguard of important Bengali political movements.

The ruling party also appears to have been tarnished somewhat by its close ties with the country's Indian liberators. New Delhi gave prompt and extensive economic aid to the newly independent country—only the US has contributed more—and made a strong effort to maintain low visibility there. The people of Muslim Bangladesh, however, have long feared and disliked the Hindu traders from India who dominated Bengali commercial affairs before the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Also, there have been allegations that the Indians have foisted shoddy goods on the Bangladesh market, that the Indians have not done enough to halt smuggling of scarce Bangladesh goods into India, and that Indian troops engaged in looting before their withdrawal from Bangladesh last March. The rise in anti-Indian sentiment has hurt the ruling party, which has remained strongly pro-Indian because of gratitude for New Delhi's role in the independence struggle and its subsequent aid contributions.

The 14 months of Awami League rule have also witnessed some important achievements. The government has managed to establish itself as a more or less accepted and functioning institution throughout the country. Enough food has arrived and been distributed to avert famine—largely due to the efforts of foreign donors. Much of the

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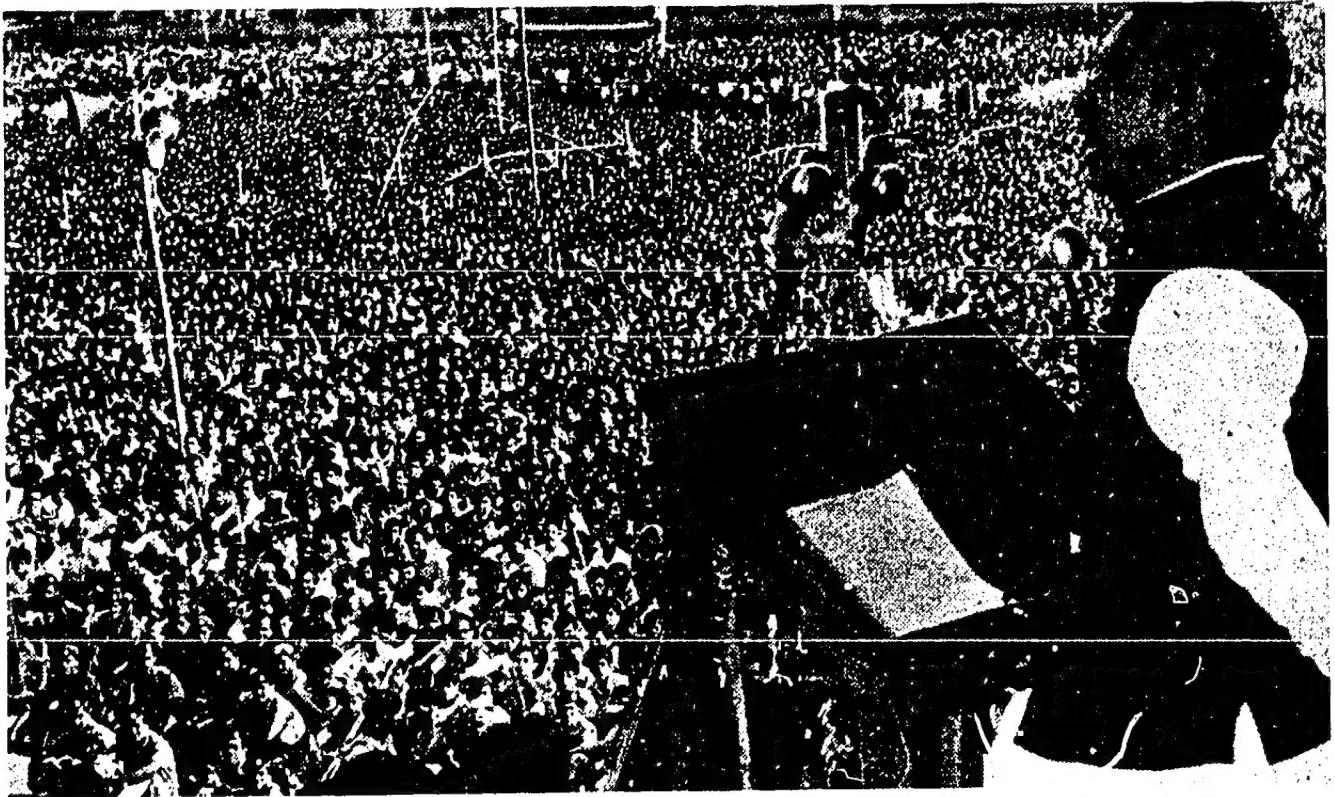
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all-important water transport system has been restored. Most villagers—including the millions who fled to India in 1971 and returned last year—have rebuilt their modest homes and resumed farming. The production and export of jute, the country's chief export commodity, have reached about 80 percent of pre-1971 levels, although other exports have been disappointing.

Political and criminal violence, chronic to the region, has continued, but the widespread breakdown in law and order anticipated by some observers a year ago has been forestalled by a buildup of the security services, the avoidance of famine, and Mujib's exhortations against violence and indiscipline. Nor has there been serious violence between Muslims and Hindus—the latter make up about one sixth of the population—or between the majority Bengalis and the small Bihari Muslim minority, despite strong Bengali resentment of the Biharis' past cooperation with the Pakistanis.

Several other factors have helped the Awami League remain strong. The party's organizational machine is still far superior to that of the other parties. Mujib's continuing domination over the party and its monopoly on patronage so far have prevented it from fragmenting, even though its membership embraces a variety of leftists, moderates, and opportunists. Mujib, moreover, is still widely loved or at least highly regarded. He has been campaigning actively in most parts of the country. Opposition leaders have on a few occasions personally criticized him in public, but they do not appear to have met with much public sympathy. Finally, the opposition parties themselves have remained small and divided.

Only the Awami League is running candidates in all 300 election contests. Awami Leaguers are running without opposition in 11 constituencies. Mujib himself is assured of re-election; he is running in four constituencies, including two in which there is no opposition



Mujib: Popular Campaigner

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candidate. Candidates who win more than one seat will be required to vacate all but one. The vacated seats presumably will be filled through by-elections.

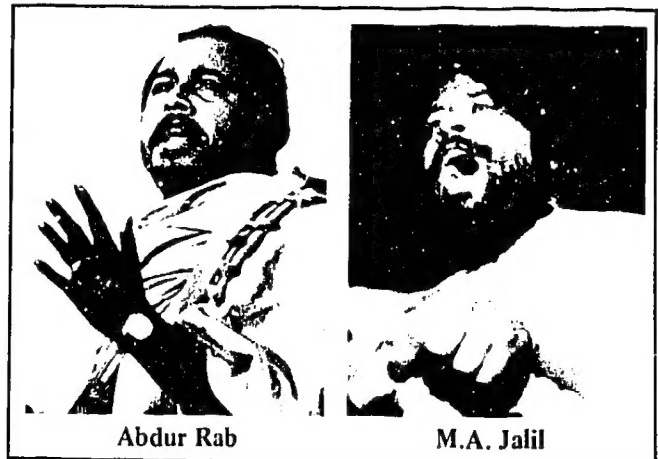
The Opposition

All of the groups challenging the Awami League this year are leftist-oriented; in the 1970 elections most of the party's opponents were on its right. This time around, the opposition parties are accusing the league of failing to come to grips with the problems of economic privation, corruption, and lawlessness. They also hold that the ruling party has sought to harass and intimidate its opponents through the use of strong-arm tactics and the misuse of special powers granted last year for the purpose of facilitating action against persons who collaborated with Pakistan. Two of the main opposition groups have also sought to capitalize on rising anti-Indian sentiment.

Although precise figures are lacking, each of the three principal opposition groups appears to be running for between 190 and 240 seats. The sharp upsurge in violence between Awami League and opposition groups that was widely feared when the campaign began has not materialized, probably because the opposition parties realize they would be outnumbered and outgunned in any major violent confrontation with the Awami League. There remains a possibility, however, that one or more of the opposition parties will decide during the final days of the campaign that an Awami League sweep is inevitable and that their interests are best served by withdrawing from the elections and turning to disruptive violence.

Opposition Groups

National Socialist Party (Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal-JSD): This party was created last fall by two young leftists, Abdur Rab and M. A. Jalil. Jalil became the party's president and Rab the general secretary. Rab was the leader of a leftist group within the Students' League, the Awami League's student wing. He broke with the Awami League last May, reportedly taking with him more than half the membership of the Students' League. Jalil was a fairly well-known guerrilla fighter in



the independence struggle. He was highly critical of the Indian Army's conduct in Bangladesh last year and was jailed by the Bangladesh Government after reportedly leading a unit that killed several Indian soldiers found looting a jute mill. Rab and Jalil argue that the government has been inept, corrupt, and insufficiently socialistic.

The party will probably attract some support among students, urban youth, and the small organized labor movement, but it does not appear likely to make major inroads in rural areas, where more than 80 percent of the population lives. Of the three main opposition groups, the National Socialist Party has been the one most frequently rumored to be considering withdrawal from the elections. The party claims that it tried to run candidates in all 300 races but was physically barred by Awami League supporters from filing in a number of constituencies. Rab is not a candidate, but Jalil has entered several races, including one in which Prime Minister Mujib is also a contestant.

National Awami Party/Muzaffar (NAP/M): This group, led by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, was established in 1967-68 as the East Pakistan branch of the National Awami Party/Requisitionist, a leftist, pro-Moscow organization. Muzaffar's party was generally regarded as a front for the Moscow-oriented Communist Party of Bangladesh. (The Communist Party, which still maintains close ties with the Muzaffar party, was illegal until independence, remains very small, and is

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Muzaffar Ahmed

contesting only four seats on its own.) Muzaffar's party, both in 1971 and immediately after independence, was sometimes critical of the Awami League but generally supported it. Last summer, however, Muzaffar moved firmly into opposition, sharply attacking the government for incompetence and corruption.

The party's student supporters played a leading role in frequently bloody anti-government and anti-US demonstrations earlier this winter. Violent clashes between Muzaffar's followers and Awami League groups reached a peak in January. The Muzaffar group apparently got the worst of those clashes, and it has been quieter in recent weeks. Some Awami Leaguers have claimed that Moscow supported the Muzaffar party's agitation, but there is no independent evidence of Soviet involvement. The party appears well-organized and has support among students, but Muzaffar lacks wide personal popularity, and his party is tainted in many people's eyes by its pro-Indian stance and its sizable Hindu component. In 1970 the party won one seat in the provincial assembly and none in the national assembly. Muzaffar himself was defeated in his national assembly race by the same Awami Leaguer he is facing this time.

All-Party Action Committee (APCC): This is a hodgepodge of the National Awami Party/Left, the Bangladesh National League, and five tiny left-wing splinter groups. The National Awami Party/Left, originally established in 1957, is led by a colorful octogenarian peasant leader, Maulana Bhashani. Bhashani is a radical leftist and an outspoken critic of India. For years Bha-



Maulana Bhashani

shani was respected by impoverished rural Bengalis, but his long-time pro-Peking orientation may have hurt him during the past two years. The Chinese are unpopular in Bangladesh because of their support for Pakistan.

Beside Bhashani, the coalition has one other well-known leader, Bangladesh National League chief Ataur Rahman Khan, a one-time chief minister of East Pakistan. Except for the National Awami Party/Left, the coalition parties are very small. Bhashani's party itself lacks organization and in reality appears to be more an amorphous movement than a political party. Bhashani's party ran for only a few seats in the 1970 elections, winning none, and the National League withdrew from the few contests it had entered. Bhashani himself is not a candidate.

After the Elections

A victorious Awami League regime under Prime Minister Mujib is not likely to make major changes in either domestic or foreign policy. At home, the government will continue to give top priority to the prevention of famine and to economic reconstruction within a socialist framework. Internationally, it will pursue continued good relations with New Delhi and Moscow, but will remain committed to the concept of non-alignment. Mujib will probably continue to restrain leading Awami Leaguers from being overly critical of the US, the country's leading source of economic assistance.

With the elections out of the way, Mujib would have less reason to worry that a shift to a more flexible policy toward Pakistan might have adverse domestic political consequences. Some well-informed Indians believe that New Delhi may urge him after the elections to be more forthcoming on the issue that is of most immediate concern to Islamabad, the disposition of the 90,000 Pakistani war prisoners India is holding.

Nevertheless, Mujib has not yet given any indication that he will stop insisting that Pakistan must recognize Bangladesh before there can be a release of prisoners. New Delhi, for its part, says it will not release them without Dacca's consent.

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Mujib also will probably keep insisting on Bangladesh's right to try at least a token number of these prisoners on charges of having committed war crimes in 1971. He has declared that he will be willing—once Islamabad has recognized his government—to discuss all outstanding issues with the Pakistanis, including prisoner repatriations, resumption of trade, and the division of the debts

and assets of the formerly united Pakistan. He has also said that he wants to improve Bangladesh's relations with the People's Republic of China, which has been supporting Pakistan, does not recognize Bangladesh, and last fall vetoed Dacca's application for admission to the UN. [REDACTED]

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Comments and queries regarding this publication are welcome. They may be directed to [REDACTED]
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